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ABSTRACT

This brochure is written out of concern for the impact anti-gay prejudice and discrimination have on children--gay and straight. Although people have different views about homosexuality, most Americans believe that everyone should be treated fairly and with respect. American society has many kinds of families, and many people have neighbors, friends and family members who are gay. Children recognize this but may still be confused about sexual orientation. This brochure highlights the importance of talking with children about sexual orientation issues. As part of the research for this brochure, the National Mental Health Association spoke with straight parents across the country about their experiences talking to their children about sexual orientation. Included in this brochure are stories and advice from those interviews. Individual sections are dedicated to talking with preschool-age children, school-age children, and teenagers. Resources and additional reading suggestions are included. (GCP)

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National Mental Health Association

"What Does Gay Mean?"

How to Talk with Kids about Sexual Orientation and Prejudice

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LYNN PONTON, M.D.

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"What Does Gay Mean?"

How to Talk with Kids about Sexual Orientation and Prejudice

Visit www.nmha.org/whatdoesgaymean or call the NMHA Resource Center at 1-800-969-NMHA (6642) for more information or to request copies of this brochure.

LYNN PONTON, M.D.

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Dear Parents,

As the mother of two teenage daughters, I've realized something obvious to most parents: talking about sexuality with kids is not easy.

I found it awkward and uncomfortable at first, even frightening at times. But I also knew it was important to talk about tough topics with my children so they could trust me for correct information, and so I could share my values with them.

The more we talked, the better we all felt.

The National Mental Health Association asked me to write this brochure out of concern for the impact anti-gay prejudice and discrimination have on children — gay and straight. People have different views about homosexuality, but most Americans believe that everyone should be treated fairly and with respect.

Children learn about gays and lesbians at a young age from television, the playground and their friends. It's far better for you and your child to talk about issues like sexual orientation when your child is young — and before she or he gets bad information and is exposed to prejudice.

While a recent poll showed that 76 percent of all American parents are willing to discuss sexual orientation with their children, nearly as many wanted a guidebook to help them through this process. Like many parents who are straight, I wasn't sure where to start or what kind of information our kids wanted.

Kids are incredibly smart and they figure things out. They know if you're lying or keeping something from them. And the schoolyard is filled with all kinds of information — I'd rather talk to them myself. So I've always believed in being open, and it's the same when I talk about gay and lesbian people with them.

— Marta Miller,
mother of three,
Wyckoff, NJ

Dr. Lynn Ponton, author, mother of two, child psychiatrist and expert in teen issues.

We are a society with many kinds of families. Many of us have neighbors, friends and family members who are gay. Kids recognize this but may still be confused about sexual orientation. They will look to you for guidance on how to act and feel.

In these pages, I share what I've learned as both a parent and a doctor.

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) has created a web page (www.nmha.org/whatdoesgaymean) to provide additional guidance and resources for parents. As part of the research for this brochure, NMHA spoke with straight parents across the country about their experiences talking to their kids about sexual orientation. Throughout this brochure we've included stories and advice from those interviews.

This brochure doesn't have all the answers, but I hope it's a starting place to open a healthy dialogue with your child.

Lynn Ponton MD

—Dr. Lynn Ponton

4 why should I read this brochure?

Parents need to have honest conversations with their kids about all kinds of tough issues. Talking about sexual orientation is especially important. Here's why:

1. ***Talking about sexual orientation can protect your child from prejudice.*** Your child may at some point be called "gay" or "fag" — even if she or he isn't gay. And your child will probably see kids teased or attacked for supposedly "being gay."

   There are more than two million school-age lesbian and gay Americans. Many of these children are subjected to verbal or physical abuse by their peers and even by their teachers, according to a report by the highly respected organization Human Rights Watch. Visit the web site http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/ to read the powerful Human Rights Watch report.

   Many heterosexual children also suffer the consequences of anti-gay prejudice. Talking with your kids from a young age about sexual orientation will help them to deal with fears, prejudices and misinformation they will inevitably be exposed to.

2. ***Talking about sexual orientation will help you to pass on the values of respect and understanding to your child.*** Like most kids, your children and teens probably have relatives or family friends who are gay and they see gay characters on TV. Your child will have questions about gay people and will look to you for answers. Your silence on these issues can be interpreted in ways you don't intend, so it's important to take these opportunities to share your values with your child.

In the suburbs where we live, the worst insult you can sling at another kid is to call him gay. "He's so gay," kids say. Out of all the bad things you could say about someone — he's mean, selfish, ill-tempered, ignorant, greedy — I can't believe that calling someone gay is the ultimate cut.

— Marta Miller,
mother of three,
Wyckoff, NJ

You don't have to fully understand or accept homosexuality to promote tolerance. Misinformation, ignorance and fear about homosexuality can sometimes lead to violence and bullying against children perceived as different — regardless of whether or not they are gay. By speaking with your son or daughter, you will be teaching important values like respect for the feelings of other people, regardless of differences.

3. ***Talking about sexual orientation will make it easier to discuss other tough issues with your child.*** Sexual orientation is one of the toughest issues for parents to discuss with their children. If you can talk to your kids about it, you'll be better prepared to talk about other important yet difficult subjects.

   This brochure suggests a few ways to turn awkward moments into opportunities for you to become closer to your child. Throughout this brochure are quotes from parents who discuss their experience talking to their children about gays and lesbians.

Your kids take clues from the things you do every day. But other things you want to bring up with them because they won't bring them up. Especially because the media is a huge influence on the way my kids see things. It's everywhere. I mean the TV and the advertising. And their friends, too. So when it comes to sexual orientation, I want them to know that my view is that people are people. Their sexual orientation is their business. It doesn't have to be a big deal.

— Anne-Marie O'Dowd
mother of three,
Nonantum, MA

A nationwide survey of 1,000 parents in 2001 found the following:

- *61% said they would discuss homosexuality if their children asked questions.*
- *56% of parents say that prejudice and discrimination against gays and lesbians is morally wrong.*
- *67% of parents believe in teaching children that gay people are just like other people.*

Survey of 1,000 parents, Lake Snell Perry and Associates, 2001

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6 tips for your discussion

1. ***Don't wait for your child to bring up the subject — seek out "talk opportunities."*** Although parents may agree that talking about sexual orientation with their kids is important, many don't want to start with young children. But if you begin to talk with your child from an early age — with age-appropriate language — you'll teach your child tolerance and respect.

   When considering a discussion with younger children, remember that you don't need to talk about sex when you talk about sexual orientation. Only part of being gay or lesbian is about a sexual relationship. It's more important that children understand that an intimate, loving relationship is sometimes shared between two men or two women in the same way men and women who are heterosexual care for one another.

   You can use "talk opportunities," like TV shows, experiences in your own life, or experiences in your child's life to start a discussion. Teens tend to tune out more formal discussions anyway, often categorizing them as just another lecture from mom or dad. Keep an ear out for these "talk opportunities."

   What I've always told my kids is that some people choose to be together in a long-term relationship — just like their mom and I chose to be together. I discuss it in the context of a relationship — not sexually. I give an answer that's appropriate for an eleven year-old. I think you need to keep it simple and short. Keep it in a realm that a child can handle. The important thing is just to have a relationship that's open with your child and to be able to discuss anything.

   — Geoff Hill, father of two, Bakersfield, CA

2. ***Listen.*** Listening carefully will help you to understand what your child really wants to know as well as what he or she already understands. It will keep you from talking above their heads and confusing them even further.

3. ***Talk about it again.*** Most young kids can only absorb small bits of information at a time. Let some time pass then ask your child to tell you what he or she remembers about your conversation. This will help you correct any misconceptions or fill in missing facts.

4. ***Relax.*** Don't worry if you don't have all the answers. You can always do a bit of research later (see the Resources section at the end of this brochure). What is important is how you respond. If you can convey the message that no subject — including sexual orientation — is forbidden in your home, you'll do just fine.

how to talk with...

I came to this country thirty years ago from a small town in Mexico. Gays and lesbians were never mentioned. Homosexuality was top secret. In the Chicano-American community, being gay is still largely frowned upon... I want my children to be more open than my family has been. That starts with communication. Kids learn what parents teach them.

— Margarita Rodriguez, mother of two, grandmother of one, Redwood City, CA

How to Talk with Preschool-Age Children (3 to 5 years)

Children aged three to five ask a ton of questions. You should give them simple and concrete answers. They are looking for basic information — not complete or graphic explanations.

For example, after seeing two women neighbors holding their new baby, your three-year-old might ask, "Who is the mommy and who is the duddy?" You may simply explain that "Both are mommies," perhaps adding that two moms are a family and can make a home for a baby.

Preschoolers not only use words to express themselves, but they are also beginning to play and pretend. It's a wonderful time to use picture books to communicate ideas and feelings.

The early years are a time when children like to pretend to be the opposite sex, or do things that are mostly associated with being a boy or a girl. You might be surprised when your five-year-old son wants to wear a dress to school — or that your daughter prefers roughhousing and playing with trucks.

Dress-up is a normal part of childhood, even when a child is pretending to be the opposite sex. And playing at things that normally are done by kids of the opposite sex is perfectly normal and healthy.

How to Talk with School-Age Children (6 to 12 years)

Children aged six to 12 see most things in terms of how they relate to their own lives. If your seven-year-old asks, "Mommy, my friend Timmy says our teacher is gay. What does gay mean?" you might say, "Gay means that Ms. Chambers loves a woman like I love Daddy."

It's also important to understand why your child wants to know. Maybe someone said the teacher was gay in a scary or prejudiced way, and your child is looking for reassurance. Maybe your child has come up with his or her own ideas about being gay, and wants to check them out with you. Again, listening first gives you a good idea of what your child wants to know and needs to know.

Children aged 11 to 12 can identify with others. They understand that they can have several feelings about something at the same time. Their bodies are changing, and many preteens are thinking about sex, even if they aren't talking about it. Sexual curiosity and attraction to other kids of the same sex is a normal part of development. Just because your child has these feelings doesn't mean he or she is gay.

Consider these situations:

- You might discover your eleven-year-old daughter crying after school where she and her best friend were called "lesbos" because they were holding hands. Listen to what upsets her most. Does she know the meaning of the names she was called? Does she feel she should stop holding her friend's hand? Is she scared of the other kids? After talking to your daughter, you may want to follow up with the school counselor or principal to express your concerns.

I talked with my seven year-old son about how a family is usually a mother and a father and children, but sometimes people of the same sex choose to make a life together. And they make a commitment and love and care for each other. And he accepted that and understood it.

— Marta Miller,
mother of three,
Wyckoff, NJ

After the Matthew Shepard tragedy, I said that I hoped every minister in town would go into their church the next day and tell folks in their congregations that it is okay to be gay. As the Rabbi of the oldest and largest reform congregation in the Akron, Ohio area — and the father of two grown children and the grandfather of a wonderful nine-year-old — I realized that I had a responsibility to make my community an environment where the type of prejudice that killed Matthew Shepard is simply not tolerated.

— Rabbi David Horowitz,
father of two,
grandfather of one,
Akron, OH

- You might be called by your child's school because your son or daughter is bullying and calling another child "fag," "queer," "sissy," "tomboy," or saying "gay" in a hostile manner. This is an important time to talk with your child and stress the value of treating everyone with tolerance and respect.

In general, the questions and the ideas become more complicated as kids grow older. "How do people who are gay have children?" "Why do some kids call others fags?" "Why do some girls act tough and dress like boys?" And, one that is often scary for parents, "Am I gay?" If your child is wondering if he or she is gay, it's important to assure them that you love them, whatever their sexual orientation. It's also important to let them know that they will eventually answer that question for themselves as they get older and learn more about their feelings.

Talk openly with your child and be as honest as possible. You can admit when you're feeling embarrassed or don't know the answers to your child's questions. If you work together to find out the answer, you show your child that curiosity is nothing to be ashamed of.

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How to Talk with Teenagers (13 to 18 years)

Sexuality and expressing oneself as a boy or girl are major parts of adolescent lives. In adolescence, your child's friendships may become more intimate and involved. The opinions and actions of your child's peers are also highly valued by your teen. Most teens want the freedom to express themselves and want privacy around their changing bodies and sexual activity. But they also want their parents to ask them about sex.

As teens begin dating, their sexual orientation often becomes apparent, as well as the orientation of their classmates and friends. This makes adolescence an important time in your child's life for you to discuss anti-gay prejudice and to model healthy behavior. Whatever your own values and beliefs, it's important to always discourage harassment or violence.

Your child or one of his friends may tell you, "I think I'm gay." Listening carefully helps teenagers feel safe to talk with you about their feelings. It took courage for him to begin this conversation, and it will take courage on your part to follow up. This can be a confusing and difficult time, and your child needs to hear again and again that you love him or her no matter what.

The teenage years can be a lonely time for gays and lesbians as they begin to deal with their emotions and sexual feelings. In social settings, like high school, they might feel like they are the "only ones." If there is a teen in your life who is gay, lesbian or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, let them know about three groups, the Gay, Lesbian,

We're a very religious family heavily involved in our church groups. Christianity provides a platform for me to discuss difficult things with my children. It offers a model for all of us. If you're a person of faith, you have to exhibit a certain openness and temperance... I'll be honest that I have struggled about the issue of homosexuality and my faith. First and foremost, I believe that my religion teaches me that everyone deserves a core level of respect and consideration.

— Geoff Hill,
father of two,
Bakersfield, CA

We never thought to have a conversation about sexual identity with our children when they were growing up. In retrospect, the absence of this type of communication probably conveyed the idea that homosexuality was taboo.

— Rabbi David Horowitz, father of two, grandfather of one, Akron, OH

Straight Education Network (GLSEN) www.glsen.org, Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) www.pflag.org, and Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org.

The Internet has become an important way for gay teens to learn and to talk to other young people dealing with the same hopes and fears. In many cities, there are meetings for gay and lesbian teenagers. Supervised by an adult — often a counselor — these meetings provide opportunities for gay teens to meet each other and talk openly about their feelings in a safe environment. This can be a big help in reducing their isolation, which can be harmful to the mental health of gay youth.

12 questions and answers

What does sexual orientation mean? What is heterosexuality? Homosexuality? Lesbian/gay/bisexuality?

Sexual orientation means if someone is heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. A heterosexual person, or someone who is "straight," is attracted to people of the opposite sex. A homosexual person, or someone who is "gay or lesbian," is attracted to people of the same sex. A bisexual person is attracted to both men and women.

What makes someone gay?

Some people believe gay people are born gay, while others believe they choose to be gay. Most researchers believe sexual orientation is complex, and that biology plays an important role. This means that many people are born with their sexual orientation, or that it's established at an early age.

Can parents make a child gay?

You can't raise a child to be gay. Nor can parents or therapists change a young person's sexual orientation, just as they can't change their eye color, race or height.

What about the "cures" for homosexuality I've read about?

No research has shown that "reparative therapy" (psychotherapy to eliminate individuals' sexual desires for their own sex) or "transformational ministry" (the use of religion to eliminate those desires) is successful. In fact, every mainstream mental health and medical organization says these methods may be harmful. They warn that attempts to "cure" lesbians and gay men may help change sexual behavior temporarily but will also create emotional trauma.

After my daughter came out, I began attending PFLAG for support. PFLAG stands for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Joining PFLAG was a great, great help. The group support made me a lot more comfortable being open about having a bisexual child. At PFLAG I discovered that this is not such a big deal. This is nothing to be ashamed of. I began to feel that I could be a role model for other people, to protect other kids from hostile environments in our schools and culture. It is my hope that we as parents promote respect for everyone and try to appreciate the richness that diversity offers.

— Susan Davis, mother of two, grandmother of one, Shaker Heights, Ohio

What is the difference between homosexual people and transgender people?

Homosexuality (and heterosexuality) refers to a person's sexual orientation, or to whom a person feels attracted. Transgender refers to a person's gender identity, or how a person expresses their femininity or masculinity. For people who are transgender, their gender identity is different from the sex they were born. This means that someone may be born a male but feel emotionally like a female or vice versa. Some transgender people use clothes, hormones and/or surgery to fully express their gender in the world.

Is homosexuality unhealthy?

All sexual behaviors have health risks, and it's important for teens to know this. But being gay does not make someone unhealthy or unhappy. What is unhealthy is prejudice against gays and lesbians. This prejudice can be especially damaging for young gay people who are often harassed and made to feel ashamed of who they are. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association recognized homosexuality as a normal human behavior, and since then all other major health professional organizations have supported this fact.

Is homosexuality immoral?

Some religions continue to teach that homosexuality is immoral, and other spiritual communities and faiths accept people of all ages who are gay, lesbian and bisexual. No matter what your religious beliefs, a key value to share with your child is to treat all people with respect.

If I think my child is gay, what should I do?

Parents are likely to have a range of reactions. Some may hope their child is simply going through a phase, while others may wonder if they did something wrong. And some worry that their children will have harder lives because they are gay. Other parents are supportive and loving of their child's sexuality. Whatever your reaction, try to provide a supportive, nonjudgmental ear. Consider helping your child get more information by talking with other gay teens and contacting your local PFLAG, GLSEN or gay youth center. Above all else, your child needs to feel that you will always love him or her no matter what.

resources and additional reading

Please visit the web site that accompanies this brochure, **www.nmha.org/whatdoesgaymean**, for more information.

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The Sex Lives of Teenagers: Revealing the Secret World of Adolescent Boys and Girls
Ponton, Dr. Lynn

Free to Be You and Me
Thomas, Marlo

Asking About Sex and Growing Up: A Question-and-Answer Book for Boys and Girls
Cole, Joanna and Alan Tiegreen (Illustrator)

How to Talk to Your Child About Sex
Eyre, Linda and Richard Eyre

It's So Amazing!: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families
Harris, Robie H. and Michael Emberley

What's the Big Secret?: Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys
Krasny Brown, Laurie (Editor) and Marc Tolon Brown (Illustrator)

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Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences
Griffin, Carolyn Welch, Marian J. Wirth, and Arthur G. Wirth

Straight Parents, Gay Children: Inspiring Families to Live Honestly and With Greater Understanding
Bernstein, Robert A.

My Child Is Gay: How Parents React When They Hear the News
McDougall, Bryce (Editor)

Coming Out As Parents: You and Your Homosexual Child
Switzer, David K.

Coming Out to Parents: A Two-Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents
Borhek, Mary V.

Loving Someone Gay
Clark, Donald H.

Now That You Know: A Parents' Guide to Understanding Their Gay and Lesbian Children
Fairchild, Betty and Nancy Hayward

Trans Forming Families: Real Stories of Transgendered Loved Ones
Boenke, Mary (Editor)

Mom, I Need To Be a Girl
Evelyn, Just (Editor)

Out of the Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up With Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Parents
Howey, Noelle, and Ellen Samuels (Editors)

Love Makes a Family: Portraits of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Parents and Their Families
Gillespie, Peggy (Editor) and Gigi Kaeser (Photographer)

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Dr. Lynn Ponton is a leading figure in child and adolescent psychiatry who has spent more than twenty years working with children and their parents. A professor at the University of California at San Francisco, Dr. Ponton is also the author of "The Romance of Risk" and "The Sex Lives of Teenagers." She and her husband have two teenage daughters.

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